

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____
Miami Herald *PAZZ*
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More cloak, less dagger

THE CLOAK-and-dagger world in which CIA Director William Webster has operated these past four years has had enough trap doors, poison pens, and knives-in-the-back to fill a dime-store spy thriller. It would therefore be nice to believe, as Mr. Webster politely announced this week, that he simply grew weary of it all and is ready to retire.

That is not the truth, of course, as nearly the entire Bush Administration will attest — anonymously. Mr. Webster was eased out as director of central intelligence because he was not, as the veiled sources are inclined to put it, “the President’s man.” He was, on the other hand, a man of principled independence, professionalism, and honesty. He also has a politically risky sense of the CIA’s limits.

The CIA has scored some hits and some notable misses during his tenure. One of its less-publicized achievements was a 1987 report on Eastern Europe that correctly forecast the disintegration of the Soviet Empire under Mikhail Gorbachev. Like everyone else, however, the agency underestimated the pace of that change. Elsewhere, the agency won high marks for its work on counterintelligence and the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons. Reports on Afghanistan and Iraq, on the

UNDER NEXT CIA CHIEF

other hand, were a significant lapse, as apparently were those on Panama. The question is whether any other director could have done better.

Mr. Webster’s predecessor, William Casey, cultivated an omnipotent, swash-buckling image for the agency, far beyond the boundaries of law or even reality. The result was a period of excess eventually leading to the Iran-contras scandal.

Mr. Webster’s leadership not only reversed that trend but helped the CIA to face a tougher, more-diffuse mission. Despite declining budgets, the agency now covers a broad landscape of trouble spots without the simplifying presence of the Soviet monolith.

Mr. Webster’s competence and restraint, while perhaps politically fatal for him, may prove to have prepared the CIA for a more-difficult mission in the post-Cold War world. In selecting a successor, the President will apparently want someone closer to him personally. That need not — in fact, must not — preclude an appointee with Mr. Webster’s candor, independence, and most of all, his sense of limits.